

## The Importance of Interpersonal Relations in Adult Literacy Programs

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*In 2002-03, a qualitative case study explored the perspectives of 70 stakeholders connected to two community-based adult literacy programs in Manitoba, Canada. Four themes emerged from within-case and cross-case analyses of the data: program design, human relations, community context, and financial support. Instructor-learner and learner-learner relationships were essential to the theme of human relations. Research participants noted the powerful impact that these relationships had on the nature of the classroom climate and on the results of the learning process. This article therefore focuses on adult literacy learners' relationships with their instructors and peers, as a catalyst for making recommendations for practice in literacy programs and other adult education settings.*

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All given names, including program communities, are pseudonyms. The following definitions apply, in accordance with their use by program stakeholders: *learners* are students, *coordinators/instructors* are head practitioners, *other staff* are paid and volunteer instructors and support staff, *parents/significant others* are learners' close relatives and friends, *program administrators* are volunteer board

chairpersons, *referral agents* are civil servants and community agency workers who refer learners to literacy programs, and *provincial funding agents* are the government employees responsible for provincially funded adult literacy programs.

### **Review of the Literature**

The literature reveres positive interpersonal relationships between students and instructors, especially for the sake of undereducated adult learners who may not be as self-directed and self-motivated as other adult learners (Slusarski, 1994). Fagan (1991) refers to the power of the "personal touch" to motivate literacy students "beyond anything they had previously known" (p. 403). An adult educator's interpersonal skills depend on characteristics such as caring for (Amstutz, 1999) and respecting (Weinstein, 2000) students, accepting their culture (Tisdell, 1999), listening to them (Dirkx, 1997), and sharing control of the learning situation (Norton, 2001). Thus, although the focus is on the student in adult education (Richmond, 2001), much responsibility remains with the instructor to ensure optimal conditions for learning (Manthey, 2000).

Peer relations are an integral part of every group learning situation. Most adult education writers describe adults as manifesting affiliating behaviors based on feelings of affection (Kerka, 2002) and interpersonal commitment (Helfield, 2001). Others, however, maintain that many adults have interpersonal skill deficits that impact on their classroom experiences (Taylor, 1999). Adult educators therefore have a responsibility to teach students to respect each other's disparate perspectives and to emotionally connect with and support one another in the classroom (Brookfield, 1995). Belenky and Stanton (2000) recommend actively teaching adults how to question, listen, and respond to each other. Caffarella and Barnett (1994) prescribe collaborative inquiry as a means to cultivate affiliative behaviors among adults.

### **Research Setting**

The research programs followed the community-based adult literacy program model endorsed by the Government of Manitoba. Their different histories, however, had resulted in somewhat different foci for program delivery.

The Mayville program began in 1989 as a part-time one-to-one service by a paid instructor to a handful of students with basic literacy needs, but by 2002-03 it was serving 116 students. This program supplemented adult literacy instruction with adult high school courses. It had earned a reputation for helping adult dropouts complete grade 12, as well as for successfully integrating one-to-one and small-group instruction, blending adult literacy and high school curricula, and delivering internationally recognized MicroSoft computer courses.

The Rutherford program began in 1989 as a home-based one-to-one volunteer tutoring program for school children, but by 2002-03 it was serving 194 (mostly adult) students. This program offered instruction at all academic levels ranging from beginning literacy to post-secondary tutorial support. It was particularly well known for accepting every learner who asked for help, and for successfully meeting the special needs of students with learning disabilities and other learning challenges.

### **Research Methodology**

The Mayville and Rutherford programs were selected from 37 programs receiving Manitoba community-based adult literacy grants in 2002-03. The 70 volunteer research participants belonged to seven stakeholder categories: 37 learners (18 men and 19 women), 2 coordinators/instructors, 11 other staff members, 7 parents/significant others of learners, 2 program administrators, 8 community referral agents, and 2 provincial funding agents. These stakeholders contributed data through two primary means: 34 compositions by learners, other staff, and a provincial funding agent (brief responses to questions about their program experiences); and 58 interviews with individuals from every stakeholder category (45-minute conversations based on more detailed questions about their program experiences). These

compositions and interview transcripts were analyzed to produce within-case and cross-case comparisons of program stakeholder perspectives.

### **Research Findings**

Of the stakeholder relationships that were reported, those that had developed between individual instructors and students, and between individual learners, were perceived as most critical. Research participants noted the powerful impact that these relationships had on the nature of the classroom climate and on the results of the learning process. (See Figure 1, "Defining Characteristics of the Interpersonal Relationships in the Mayville and Rutherford Adult Literacy Programs.")

***Figure 1. Defining Characteristics of the Interpersonal Relationships in the Mayville and Rutherford Adult Literacy Programs***

<b>Between Instructors and Learners</b>	<b>Among Learners</b>
reciprocal academic and interpersonal effects partners in the learning process respect informality pride in learners' accomplishments faith in learners' abilities to learn "dropouts" are welcome to return academic and emotional support continues after learners leave the program suspension of judgment of learners' lifestyle behaviors and personal histories recognition of learners' personal problems and referrals to community services	know each other well valuing of racial and socio-cultural variations celebration of each other's successes non-judgmental peer groups community of diverse learners – different ages, genders, academic skills, and life experiences reciprocal academic learning non-stressful environment for group presentations emotional support role modeling, especially Native elders mentoring, especially older to younger

#### *Relationships between Instructors and Learners*

The stakeholders perceived positive staff-learner

relations as the vertebrae that made up the spines of the Mayville and Rutherford programs. Referral agent Byron happily reported that for the Mayville staff members, "It's almost a holiday to them, because they're dealing with people who want to learn and who are mature. They just love it, and the students are getting such a benefit!" and Rutherford instructor Ted exclaimed, "I had no idea the program would have such a positive effect on me!" The interviews with coordinators/instructors Veronica in Mayville and Cheryl in Rutherford, as well as with other staff members in both programs, were dotted with stories of how individual learners had touched their professional and personal lives, and all of the learners' interviews and compositions contained accolades for their instructors. As a program administrator, Eleanor saw it as essential that the Mayville program have enough staff members for learners to choose with whom they would feel most comfortable bonding. Staff members Dora and Ted also noted learners' tendencies to bond with different instructors in Rutherford. Thus, the stakeholders held instructors primarily responsible for the mutually agreeable staff-learner relationships that characterized their adult literacy programs.

The adult nature of these instructor-learner relationships was a critical factor of their success. In both programs, staff and learners took breaks and ate lunch together, called each other by their first names, and got to know each other's out-of-program lives. Learners and their parents/significant others were especially quick to point out that the roots of their satisfaction with the literacy programs lay in the way that students were treated as adult equals to their instructors, partners in the learning process. Mayville administrator Eleanor joined these stakeholders, as well as the coordinators/instructors and other staff in both programs, in recounting classroom situations wherein students had assisted teachers in finding answers to academic problems and in solving computer processing malfunctions. Above all, stakeholders described reciprocal staff-learner relations based on mutual trust and respect, manifested in what coordinator/instructor Veronica called a

"level playing field" of adult team members. These programs' staff and learners may not have become personal friends who shared leisure time together, but they certainly came to understand one another on a more informal level than that which typifies most other educational settings.

The interpersonal trust that defined staff-learner relations in this study's programs was grounded in staff members' positive regard for their students. Veronica and Cheryl expressed particular admiration for learners who were struggling to cope with adversities in their lives. Veronica said of a terminally ill student, "She says, 'You get up in the morning and there's a purpose. There's a place to go to. There are things to be done.' And this is one of those things, coming to the program." Cheryl said of a visually challenged student who was learning to read, "I do admire him for wanting to do this. For striving to do something that he's always wanted to do." Both coordinators/instructors remarked that they had led remarkably sheltered lives in comparison to the broader, and often more tragic, life experiences of the learners they served, and both evinced great pride in their students' work. Other staff members also expressed pride in learners' accomplishments. For example, Sheena enthused that in Mayville, "Putting together a story or reading a chapter book for the first time can be a real success – and to be able to say that you're part of that?" and Dora delighted in "seeing the light click on" when she helped a Rutherford student learn something new. Thus, the positive regard with which this study's adult literacy staff members beheld learners manifested itself in admiration and pride in learners' efforts as well as their accomplishments.

The staff members' positive regard for students was rooted in an unwavering faith in their abilities to learn, and translated directly into a determination to do whatever was necessary to ensure that successful learning transpired, at whatever literacy skill levels were appropriate. Instructor Rita portrayed beginning literacy skills learner Martha in Mayville as "a beautiful lady, very smart, and a real survivor," and

coordinator/instructor Cheryl described beginning literacy skills learner Wade in Rutherford as having "lots of smarts, you know, but they're not on paper." Leaner Joyce added that it was just as important for Mayville staff that learners be aware of their confidence in students' abilities to learn: "They need you to know that that's what they're here for." Parent/significant other Arla was grateful for the interest that Veronica had shown in her son, by phoning him periodically when he took a four-year absence from the Mayville program, to make sure that he felt welcome to return. Referral agent Ken commended the Rutherford staff members for providing a strong emotional and academic support system that followed learners from the adult literacy program into other academic settings. It was therefore important for everyone involved in this study's adult literacy programs that both staff and learners maintained a "win-win" attitude toward students' learning potential, no matter how expansive or how limited.

The devotion of staff members to their learners' best interests commanded a level of empathy and emotional support that superseded passing judgment on learners' past lifestyles and behaviors. Cheryl expressed particular sympathy for regular school bullies, whom she saw as victims of social pressures that made it "nicer to be viewed in that regard as opposed to being viewed as stupid." She choked up when she said of one young woman who had been physically restrained in regular school to control her violent outbursts,

She has very much lost faith. I'm very worried for her. It seemed that the thing she needed the most from us was for somebody to believe that she is a valuable human being, and that she is a good human being. She thinks she's worthless!

Veronica and Cheryl acknowledged the life course mistakes that their students had made, some of which they were still making (such as substance abuses), yet they spoke very sympathetically of these learners' problems, and they expressed genuine admiration for learners' efforts to improve themselves. Veronica and Cheryl saw their learners' socially unacceptable

out-of-program behaviors as problems to be solved, rather than as reasons to reject them as students.

Veronica and Cheryl acknowledged the need for program staff to be vigilant about identifying learners' needs for problem-solving interventions. Both of these coordinators/instructors related situations wherein learners had evinced a need to talk over some pressing concern or another before settling down to their school work, and both insisted that learners with addictions issues had to self-identify their problems and ask for help before any intervention would work. Veronica and Cheryl also reported that they helped learners access outside counseling and other kinds of community supports. However, while Veronica kept a list of social service agencies posted in the classroom, and tended to limit this support to helping Mayville students make their first appointments for outside help, Cheryl was more apt not only to make the phone calls for the Rutherford learners, but to take them to their first appointments. Veronica spoke of learners whom she had advised to take time off from their studies in order to attend to personal problems, especially when these problems created classroom behaviors that affected other students' learning, and always with an open invitation to return when they were ready. Cheryl and fellow staff members Dora and Ted, on the other hand, insisted that their first duty was to keep learners in the program whenever possible, so as to maximize their chances for achieving some degree of academic success while they were working through their other problems. The extent to which this study's adult literacy programs intervened in their learners' personal problems therefore depended more on the proclivities of these programs' coordinators/instructors than on the learners' problems per se.

Intervention in learners' personal lives was an especially contentious issue for provincial funding agent June. At the same time as she clearly supported Veronica's comparatively hands-off approach to dealing with serious personal issues, June equally clearly denounced Cheryl's comparatively more intense level of involvement:

Cheryl gets way too involved with students. We've had lots and lots of discussions about creating boundaries and setting safe boundaries. I think she puts in long, *long* extra hours, dealing with the social personal issues as well as the teaching issues, and it's hard for her to separate the two out. We've had long discussions about this, and I don't think we ever resolve them. She knows how I feel, and I know how she feels.

June felt that Cheryl had crossed the fine line between giving adequate student support and nurturing learner dependency, and she worried that Cheryl was spending too much time finding solutions to students' non-academic problems at the expense of addressing their learning needs. However, she conceded that it was ultimately up to each program coordinator/instructor, presumably in consultation with her program's administrative board, to operationally define staff-learner boundaries for dealing with students' personal problems.

#### *Relationships among Learners*

Learner Joyce summed up the tone of interactions among the students in both Mayville and Rutherford when she said, "Everybody gets to know everybody, and everybody's here for the same goal, in a sense." Positive inter-learner relations were reported by every stakeholder group. Parents/significant others Jonathan and Ralph highlighted the effects of peer relationships on the overall life satisfaction of Jonathan's wife in Mayville and Ralph's son in Rutherford. Learners Roberta and Joyce appreciated the opportunity to meet other students from very different racial and socio-cultural backgrounds. Roberta also delighted in the Mayville program's tradition of having students cheer to celebrate each other's successes at all academic levels. Learners of both genders expressed joyful relief that their programs were devoid of judgmental peer groups. Coordinator/instructor Veronica reveled in her students' desires to learn more about each other's lifestyles in Mayville, and staff member Ted extolled the impacts of having socially disadvantaged students share successful learning experiences.

with others of similar educational backgrounds and economic circumstances in Rutherford – students who in their out-of-program lives would probably be interacting in less desirable situations. In each program, what provincial funding agent June called "a community of learners" included kindred academic spirits of both genders, various ages, and a vast array of incoming skills and life experiences.

A strategic product of the interpersonal relationships among the learners in this study was that they learned academic skills from each other. Learners and instructors from both programs, as well as parents/significant others from Rutherford, noted how students helped each other with classroom assignments. In the Mayville program, for example, students completing grade 12 courses assisted beginning literacy students, and sometimes vice versa. Female adult learners from both programs commented on the benefits of learning by just watching and listening to other students as they worked. For adult learners Joyce and Ryan in Mayville, the stress of making presentations and participating in group discussions had been significantly reduced by having a classroom full of supportive peers. Undeniably, students' learning in these programs was enhanced by the very nature of the peer interactions that occurred among learners.

Also pivotal to the relationships among program learners was how they helped each other in personal ways. Veronica and Cheryl spoke of students who had become role models and heroes to their classmates. Both programs had Native elder learners who had helped younger learners find solutions to addictions and other personal problems. Phil had even led sharing circles in class, which taught other Rutherford learners how to vent their emotions in a safe and confidential setting. Both programs had other students, as well, such as Mayville's Joyce and Rutherford's Daphne, who were admired and regarded as leaders by their classmates. In Mayville, Gloria had become a mentor to younger learner Brandy; and in Rutherford, Rodney had played the same role for Luke. Thus, the interpersonal

relationships that developed among this study's learners engendered personal improvements as well as academic skills development.

### **Discussion**

Interpersonal relations were the foundation for personal meaning-making among this study's stakeholders. Mayville and Rutherford instructors admired learners who struggled with personal and learning problems, and took personal pride in their learners' accomplishments. Just as importantly, they believed in these students' abilities to learn. Research participants from every stakeholder category commented on the value of maintaining warm and friendly adult-based relationships among staff members and students. Some stressed the informal nature of these interactions as a prerequisite for establishing adult contexts for communication. For several learners, the provision of refreshments in the classroom was proof that they were being treated as adults in an adult learning environment.

The personalized relationships between this study's instructional staff and learners included an unconditional acceptance of students as adults worthy of respect regardless of the behaviors that arose from their personal lives. Coordinators/instructors Veronica and Cheryl were committed to helping students resolve whatever personal problems were getting in the way of their learning, and both reported using gentle persuasion as a tool to facilitate this problem-solving process, whether through one-to-one discussion within the program setting or through referrals to professional services in the community. However, while Veronica was more likely to suggest that students with serious problems take a break from their studies in order to seek external guidance, Cheryl was more likely to address these issues within the context of the program itself, and to recommend that students under the care of community professionals continue to attend the program while working through their personal problems. Provincial funding agent June worried that Cheryl was "crossing healthy boundaries" in her relations with learners.

The adult literacy students in this study followed their instructors' examples by successfully striving to become a community of learners despite the heterogeneous nature of their different genders, ages, skills, and experiences. Mayville and Rutherford students and staff members alike reported that learners cooperated well together, and were genuinely interested in each other's welfare. These learners enjoyed each other's company, and they appreciated opportunities to learn from one another. They had learned to celebrate the differences that likely would have kept them from interacting in their out-of-school lives.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The following recommendations for practice are a celebration of the emotional and academic benefits that accrue from positive instructor-learner and learner-learner relationships in literacy and other adult education settings.

- That adult educators make students feel welcome in class, through such means as arranging furnishings less formally, engaging in casual conversation at the beginning and end of class sessions, and making refreshments available.
- That adult educators take provincial funding agent June's advice to ensure that the tug-of-war between intellectual stimulation and emotional support does not adversely affect classroom dynamics.
- That adult education programs develop clear policies regarding how staff members are to approach the personal problems of students.
- That adult educators attend professional development workshops designed to help them learn how to foster positive relations among their students, and how to combat interpersonal dissension and strife.

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